

# Deconstructing School Choice: Problem Schools or Problem Students?

## School Choice as a Public Administration Puzzle

*School choice has developed into one of the most contentious policy debates in K–12 education. Proponents argue that choice leads to competition among schools, thereby raising school quality for all students, while opponents claim that school choice often results in racial segregation and worsens inequity. The findings of this study, collected from qualitative interviews with school administrators and quantitative analysis of school performance and enrollment data, suggest that a common form of school choice, intradistrict transfer, may not always have the desired impacts on administrators, particularly with regard to intradistrict transfer programs. In addition, the author finds important differences in criteria that shape transfer decisions at different grade levels, and in the factors that shape the decision to transfer away from a school versus those that influence decisions about which school to transfer into.*

Over the past 25 years, a number of scholars have advocated a shift toward policies that seek to use market forces of competition in order to make public agencies and bureaucracies run more efficiently and respond more effectively to citizen (consumer) demands. Within the area of K–12 education, this trend has taken the form of school choice (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Chubb and Moe 1990; Coulson 1999; Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000; Hoxby 2003; Merrifield 2001; Peterson and Greene 1997; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). School choice refers to a wide variety of policies that allow students to transfer out of the public school to which they normally would be assigned based on residence. These policies range from fairly limited systems of public choice that allow students to transfer from their neighborhood public school to some other public school outside their residential

area, to more expansive systems of choice that provide tuition vouchers for students to exit the public school system entirely and attend private school instead (Henig 1994; Belfield and Levin 2002). Proponents have argued that by giving individuals the freedom to exit failing schools—and take their tax money with them—and thus injecting competition into the public school system, school choice represents a potential “panacea” for public education (Chubb and Moe 1990). However, critics contend that school choice exacerbates racial segregation and social class stratification, resulting in a “two-tiered” system of public education (Henig 1994; Lankford and Wyckoff 2005; Levin 1998; Smith and Meier 1995).

Much of this debate has focused on charter schools and voucher programs. While these forms of choice are important and clearly warrant substantial investigation, thus far, they have affected a relatively small percentage of schools and communities. Less work has explored the impacts of intradistrict choice policies, which are much more widespread. Furthermore, the No Child Left Behind legislation contains intradistrict transfer provisions that are designed to leverage market forces of competition within the public school system, making intradistrict transfers increasingly relevant (Fusarelli 2007).

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This study will use a mixed-methods approach to examine several assumptions related to school choice that previously have received little attention. To do so, it first will discuss interviews with school administrators that reveal a surprising reaction to school choice among those positioned on the frontlines. It then will expand on this discussion with a quantitative analysis of school performance and transfer data to better understand the factors

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that drive parent/student decisions to exercise choice options. The findings presented here indicate that several aspects of intradistrict choice, particularly with regard to parent/student behavior, are poorly understood and need further exploration.

## Review of the Literature

School choice proponents argue that choice provides several benefits. First, it allows parents to find schools that better match their preferences for a particular pedagogical approach or emphasis. Second, it provides a mechanism for students who otherwise would be trapped in chronically underperforming schools to gain access to better educational opportunities. Finally, proponents claim that choice results in competition among schools, which ultimately improves both schools of choice and traditional public schools (Chubb and Moe 1990; Coulson 1999; Hill and Celio 1998; Merrifield 2001; Moe 2002).

Whether competition improves public schools, or how much it improves them, is up for debate. Some scholars have determined that competition has no significant positive impact on school performance (Smith and Meier 1995; Witte 1996), whereas others have found evidence to the contrary (Peterson and Greene 1997; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000). Belfield and Levin (2002) conclude that competition often improves performance, but that the effects are generally modest, while Abernathy (2005) argues that competition from charter schools has positive effects on principals at traditional public schools. Hoxby (1998, 2000, 2003) has conducted several studies that have concluded that increased competition improves school performance.

Many criticisms of school choice center on the potential to create or increase inequity. One such concern is that choice will worsen school segregation. Some authors have argued that parents will use choice policies as a mechanism to resegregate based on race (Goldhaber 1999; Henig 1994; Levin 1998; Smith and Meier 1995). Tedin and Weiher (2004) find evidence that the racial characteristics of schools have important impacts on whether parents enroll their child, particularly for middle- and low-performing schools. Bifulco and Ladd (2007) analyze charter schools in North Carolina to determine whether there is a racial sorting effect, and find strong evidence that there is. They conclude that because of these racial sorting effects, charter programs actually have served to increase the black/white achievement gap in the state.

Some scholars, however, have pointed out that stratification and de facto segregation are already prevalent within many school systems in the absence of choice. Indeed, powerful evidence exists that, largely because of persistent problems with residential segregation and judicial rulings that have overturned many attempts at race-conscious enrollment and busing policies, many of the nation's public schools are becoming increasingly segregated by race and income (Orfield and Lee 2007). As a result, some scholars argue that, if anything, school choice will be used as a vehicle for parents to overcome residential segregation, and ultimately will result in more diverse schools (Greene 2005; Marschall 2000; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000).

Another major argument against school choice focuses on the concept of "skimming" or "creaming." Several scholars have found

evidence that more advantaged students and parents, in terms of income, parental involvement, motivation to do well in school, and educational attainment, are most likely to take advantage of choice options and exit their traditional public school (Abernathy 2005; Levin 1998; Smith and Meier 1995). Thus, some argue that choice will result in skimming as already advantaged schools take the best students from the public school system, leaving those students who are less likely to succeed academically in traditional schools (Henig 1994; Smith and Meier 1995). As a result of their exit, traditional public schools face a number of potentially hazardous consequences. As Abernathy (2005) notes, highly involved parents often play a vital role in supporting principals and helping to accomplish reform initiatives and respond to challenges. Because low-income schools often have considerably fewer of these parents to begin with, skimming poses a considerable threat to schools located within those communities. Ultimately, the major criticism is that skimming results in a two-tiered system, wherein disadvantaged students are concentrated in one set of schools (which are likely to underperform), while the most advantaged students cluster in a different set of higher-performing schools (Smith and Meier 1995). It should be noted, however, that several empirical studies of charter schools and voucher programs have found little evidence to suggest that skimming has occurred (Buckley and Schneider 2007; Greene 2005; Kleitz et al. 2000; Rapp and Eckes 2007).

Other scholars have raised related concerns about the ability of low-income parents, who are less likely to be able to acquire accurate information about school quality, to make informed decisions and enroll students in high-performing schools (Henig 1994, 1996). Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000), however, find that while many parents lack accurate knowledge about the schools in their area—attributable to the fact that most low-income parents reside in low-quality networks that provide little accurate information on schools—they still are able to enroll their children in those schools best matching their preferences. They argue that the market mechanism of choice only requires that a small subsection of parents, which they term "marginal choosers," become highly educated about school quality and conditions. These highly informed parents put pressure on schools to improve, causing competition that ultimately benefits all parents.

While there exists a strong foundation of research examining these fundamental components of the school choice debate, others areas have received considerably less attention. While substantial work has been done to explore the impacts of choice on test scores and racial demographics, much less research has attempted to understand how school administrators perceive and react to choice structures. Proponents of school choice make several critical assumptions about the degree to which administrators react to choice in ways that result in different educational outcomes than would be produced in a traditional system, but very little scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding whether administrator perceptions about and reactions to choice are well aligned with these assumptions.

Another area of research that deserves more attention is the potential for school choice to operate differently as students advance through the school system. Do parents of elementary school students react to the market mechanisms of choice in the same way that parents of high school students do? Finally, much of the

existing research treats choice behavior as a single decision to exit failing schools (see Gresham et al. 2000 for a notable exception). This study will present evidence that exercising choice is a two-stage process involving one set of criteria that shape the decision to exit a particular school, and a different set of criteria that parents/students use when evaluating alternative schools.

This study is based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa was selected for a variety of reasons. First, as is often the case with social science research, the availability of data and accessibility of administrators made Tulsa an attractive site for study. More importantly, however, the Tulsa public school system is a relatively large (41,349 students) and racially diverse (38 percent white, 36 percent African American, and 16 percent Hispanic) school district that faces many of the challenges that are common to large school districts located in urban environments (Office of Accountability 2008). Finally, Tulsa has a long and established history of exploring school choice-oriented reforms, including intradistrict transfer and magnet schools, in shaping district policy.

### The History of School Choice in Tulsa

School choice in Tulsa started as a response to racial integration, as was the case in many communities across the nation. In 1973, after nearly two decades of failed attempts to adequately desegregate the public schools, Tulsa adopted a voluntary integration plan that established Booker T. Washington High School, formerly the city's black high school, and Carver Middle School (formerly an all-black middle school), as a magnet schools with strict racial balancing designed to promote a 50/50 white/black student body ratio (Woosley 2007). Shortly after its establishment as a magnet school, Booker T. Washington became the premier public high school in Tulsa, and overall, the magnet program has been incredibly successful, in terms of both promoting racial diversity and attaining impressive levels of student achievement (Office of Accountability 2008). As a result of the success that these two schools have enjoyed, the district has since added several additional magnet schools and programs.

In addition to the magnet programs, the Tulsa public school system has also offered a variety of open transfer options over the past 26 years. Beginning in 1982, the district adopted an intradistrict transfer policy that allowed students the option to transfer from their traditional or neighborhood school to any other traditional or neighborhood school within the district, so long as the receiving school had room to accept the transfer (Tulsa Public Schools 2007, 123–24). Funding for schools in the district is based on enrollment, so a loss of transfer students has a negative impact on school budgets. The district does not provide free transportation under the transfer policy, so students who elect to use the transfer option generally are responsible for providing their own transportation. Tulsa Public Schools transfer data indicate that a significant number of students at all levels exercise the transfer option. On average, between 30 percent and 35 percent of students in Tulsa use either the open transfer policy or admission to one of the district's many magnet programs to attend a school other than the one they live closest to.

### Interviews with High School Administrators and Undesirable Transfers

As previously stated, district transfer data indicate that a substantial portion of Tulsa's student population routinely exercises the transfer option to attend some school other than the one to which they normally would be assigned based on residence. Of greater interest, however, is the frequency with which students transfer into schools that appear unremarkable in terms of academic quality and extracurricular offerings. Given that six of the nine high schools in Tulsa were classified as "failing" under the No Child Left Behind law for the 2007–8 school year (and routinely have been classified as such since the law went into effect), and generally lack appealing special programs or curriculum offerings, the number

of transfers into these schools is perplexing, as the existing literature assumes that transfer decisions are driven largely by school quality. To better understand this phenomenon, I interviewed school administrators at three of Tulsa's chronically underperforming high schools.

Surprisingly, all of the administrators interviewed were relatively nonchalant about transfers, and in fact, none of the schools even actively tracked the number of transfers into or out of the school. Administrators had only general impressions about student motivations for transfers. Given that much of the scholarship on school choice centers on the assumption that schools are highly sensitive to the loss (or gain) of students, this was unexpected. When asked to give their general impressions about why students transfer, administrators felt that there were two major reasons that students opt to do so. First, many students seek to enter one of the district's two merit-based magnet programs, based on the academic advantages offered at those schools, which the neighborhood nonmagnet schools could not realistically compete with. Second, and perhaps of greater interest, a relatively large group of students transfer for reasons primarily tied to disciplinary issues or personal conflicts with staff or other students. One principal said,

The majority of the transfers are people who have had some kind of issue, either with other students, or with faculty. And in some cases, there's a legitimate need for a transfer to someplace new. But a lot of times we get kids who have already been at several other schools and had the same problems over and over. You would think that at some point the parents would realize that their child is the problem, not the school.

Administrators at each of the schools expressed similar reactions to the transfer process in Tulsa under the district's intradistrict choice policy. This may explain why many of the administrators were not seriously concerned about transfers. The district's transfer policy does not allow principals to accept or deny individual applicants. As one principal explained,

We get to tell the district if we're open for transfers or not, but if we say that we're open, we have to accept whoever they send us. A lot of people would want to accept transfers if they could say, "I'll take this one and this one, but not that one," but they can't do that.

Because many of the students who switch schools under the open transfer policy were troublemakers at their previous school, and because administrators cannot screen applicants under the transfer policy, school principals may not be as motivated to pursue transfers as the literature would predict because they anticipate that doing so will attract undesirable and potentially disruptive students. Additionally, they may not be anxious about losing transfers, as many of those transferring out are problem students.

The fact that many students use school choice programs as a response to disciplinary problems is not an entirely new observation. A number of scholars have found that charter schools, which often are built around missions centered on outreach to troubled students, recruit and enroll significant numbers of students with behavioral and disciplinary problems (Finn, Manno, and Vanourek 2000; Gresham et al. 2000; Lacireno-Paquet et al. 2002; Rofes 1998). Public schools in Tulsa, however, do not undertake such outreach efforts, and generally are not interested in boosting enrollments of these students.

Because virtually all of the previous literature assumes that, with the exception of students enrolling in charter schools aimed at those with special needs, the students most likely to utilize transfer options tend to be highly desirable students who possess superior academic motivation and are interested in transferring in order to gain access to better educational opportunities (Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt 2005; Witte 1996), the experiences of administrators in Tulsa are intriguing. Interviews with school administrators indicate that, often, the exact opposite is true, and as a result, many administrators are neither apprehensive about losing transfer students (who are often disruptive and demand a disproportionate amount of attention from staff with regard to discipline issues), nor aggressive in acquiring transfers from outside schools (who are likely to be troublemakers, and thus carry significant risks).

A number of scholars have concluded that when charter schools attract troubled students with disciplinary problems, public schools are much less likely to significantly change or improve (Gresham et al. 2000; Hess, Maranto, and Milliman 2001; Rofes 1998). These interviews suggest that, for similar reasons, intradistrict policies may be limited in motivating public school administrators to innovate or become reform oriented. Because administrators perceive no real benefit to increasing the number of transfers they receive, the intradistrict transfer policy in Tulsa has a negligible impact on many principals.

Given these intriguing interview responses, which indicate that many aspects of school choice, as it has been implemented in Tulsa, do not behave in ways that the existing literature predicts, a survey was mailed to all Tulsa public school principals to determine the extent to which impressions about the transfer policy expressed in the interviews were held throughout the district. Of the 77 surveys that were sent out, 24 were returned, resulting in a response rate of 31.1 percent.

When asked to list the primary reasons why they felt that students transferred into or out

of their school (see table 1), the most common response was school location and convenience for transportation to and from the school, followed by personal behavior or disciplinary problems, school performance or test scores, special programs or curriculum offerings, and finally perceptions about neighborhood characteristics and student body demographics. While a sample of this size is certainly limited in terms of establishing generalizability, the survey results largely reinforce the opinions expressed in the interviews. Though some Tulsa principals perceived school performance and curriculum offerings as the primary motivations for student transfers, a significant number felt that transfers were motivated primarily by nonacademic factors, including personal behavior issues.

Quantitative Analysis of School Choice in Tulsa

Much of the debate about school choice centers on the degree to which transfer decisions are made “rationally” (Schneider, Teske, and Marshall 2000). Choice proponents argue that parents use the “exit” option to leave underperforming schools that have failed their children, and enroll in schools that provide superior quality instruction, thus providing motivation for all schools to improve school quality (Chubb and Moe 1990). Choice opponents, however, argue that many parents base their decision to transfer on nonperformance or quality issues, such as race, and as a result, choice may worsen racial segregation (Smith and Meier 1995). The next section of the analysis will determine which factors best explain the use of transfer options in the Tulsa Public Schools. To do so, I rely on test scores, suspension data, transfer statistics, and school demographics, as much of the previous literature focuses on these factors as primary drivers of choice decisions.

Data and Methodology

The academic performance indicator employed here is Academic Performance Index (API) test scores, which were used by the Oklahoma Department of Education to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act for the 2002–3 through 2006–7 school years. API test scores were used because as a part of the requirements under No Child Left Behind, these scores are reported to parents, and often are published in local media outlets. Thus, they are widely used within the community, both by parents and school administrators, to assess school quality.

Because much of the debate about school choice centers on the market-based logic of competition and consumerism, the critical question for this analysis is, how does performance *relative to other schools within the district* influence the decision to exercise transfer options? As a result, rather than simply using raw API scores as the academic performance indicator, this variable was made relative by subtracting the school’s API score from the mean API score in the district. In addition, because students can only transfer within their current grade level (elementary school students cannot transfer to a high school), the scores were made relative within school levels (elementary schools were only compared against other elementary schools, middle schools against other middle schools, and high schools against other high schools). Finally, because this analysis seeks to explore

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the relationship between the previous year's academic performance and the current year's transfer behavior, this variable was lagged one year. Thus, this analysis is able to examine how changes in school performance relative to other schools within the district that students could transfer to or from affect the decision to use transfer options.

Another performance indicator that often is used in assessing school quality involves disciplinary or behavioral problems. The measure used here is total number of suspensions. These data were collected from the school profiles that are published by the Oklahoma Office of Accountability. For the same reasons discussed earlier with regard to API test scores, this variable also was made relative within school types. Thus, a negative relative suspension score means that the school had fewer suspensions and was safer than other schools in the district, and vice versa.

End-of-year transfer data were provided upon request by the Tulsa Public Schools for 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2008.<sup>1</sup> These data take a snapshot of the district at specific points in time, listing the number of students who transferred into each school from outside the school's neighborhood boundary area and the number of students who transferred from or out of the school to attend another public school in the Tulsa system. These data allow for analysis not only of net transfers (transfers in minus transfers out), but also of transfers in and out separately.

Race data were collected from school profiles made public by the Oklahoma Department of Education for the same years as the API data (2003–7). The district collects all enrollment data, including racial demographic data, based on fall enrollment, and uses the following racial categories: white, black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian. All students are assigned to one of these categories (students cannot identify themselves as multiracial), and there is no “other” option available. In order to compare the previous year's racial demographics as a predictor of transfer activity, these data were lagged one year.

Because this study is concerned with transfer behavior among traditional public schools that admit students primarily based on residence, five magnet schools in the district were excluded from the analysis because they have heightened recruiting efforts and offer language or arts programs and advanced academic coursework specially targeted to draw in students from across the district, and do not admit any students based on residence.<sup>2</sup> Edison High School, Memorial High School, and Wilson Middle School each have magnet programs that operate within the school, but largely accept students based on residential boundary areas; for the purposes of this analysis, they were not coded as magnet schools. Additionally, six schools in the district were excluded from this analysis because the district either lacked transfer data for them or they were too small to produce valid API scores.<sup>3</sup> A total of 73 schools (53 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 8 high schools) are included in this data set. Summary statistics for the data are reported in table 2. A Wooldridge (2002) test revealed auto-correlation, so ARIMA (AR1) models were used.<sup>4</sup>

Findings

Table 3 reports the findings for net transfers versus performance and race for all Tulsa public schools in the data set. There were 365

Table 1 Primary Reasons Why Students Transfer

Reason	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Location	14	58.3
Behavioral issues/disciplinary problems	10	41.7
Test scores/school performance	9	37.5
Curriculum offerings/special programs	9	37.5
Student body demographics	6	25

Table 2 Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Net transfers	−30.96	136.34	−551	258
Transfers in	109.46	95.80	7	524
Transfers out	140.44	119.32	16	645
Relative API	27.49	263.53	−1040.434	811.08
Relative suspensions	0	91.30	−402.02	475.75
Percent white	36.58	21.19	0	85.29
Percent black	37.03	27.42	2	99.05
Percent Hispanic	14.69	13.37	0	59
Percent Native American	10.05	5.75	0	30
Percent Asian	1.58	2.48	0	17.69

Table 3 Performance versus Net Transfers

Independent Variable	All Tulsa Public Schools	High Schools Only	Elementary Schools Only
Relative test scores	0.049*** (0.009)	0.584*** (0.145)	0.013 (0.009)
Relative suspensions	−0.144*** (0.033)	−0.067 (0.074)	−0.081 (0.064)
Percent black	−1.47*** (0.188)	−4.21*** (1.15)	−0.643*** (0.173)
Percent Hispanic	−2.16*** (0.291)	0.178 (2.12)	−1.75*** (0.311)
Percent Native American	−1.24*** (0.488)	−1.54 (2.52)	0.715 (0.481)
Enrollment	0.017 (0.023)	0.111 (0.076)	0.013 (0.026)
Constant	75.99*** (18.11)	−15.78 (93.96)	42.25** (17.58)
N	365	40	265

Dependent variable: net transfers.  
\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ .

observations in the analysis, and all of the independent variables except for enrollment were statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

Relative test scores had a positive moderate effect on net transfers. The coefficient for relative test scores was 0.049, which means that for every 20-point increase in relative API score, a school received a one-student increase in net transfers. While the coefficient of 0.049 may initially seem small, it is important to remember the large range (more than 1,800 points) for relative test scores. Thus, a school that improved relative test scores by one standard deviation (263.53) would receive a net increase of 12.91 transfers. The other performance indicator, relative suspensions, had a coefficient of −0.144, which means that a one-standard-deviation (91.3) increase in the number of suspensions (which would represent an *increase* in behavioral problems) would result in a net loss of 13.14 transfers.

These findings indicate that academic performance matters in transfer decisions and, more importantly, has a positive effect on

net transfers, even within the open transfer process among neighborhood schools in Tulsa. This supports the claims made by school choice advocates, who argue that transfer decisions are dominated by school quality. The race variables, however, are also significant, even when controlling for test scores. While school choice in Tulsa is driven largely by relative academic performance, race still plays a significant role, which supports the arguments made by those who contend that school choice results in heightened racial segregation and has potentially catastrophic implications for schools located in neighborhoods and communities with high minority or poverty concentrations. Finally, these data provide support for the claims made by Tulsa public school officials that many students exercise transfer options based on personal disciplinary issues that cause them to get into trouble at one school and transfer elsewhere. As the number of suspensions relative to the other schools in the district increased, net transfers decreased.

Aside from the findings of interest with regard to performance and race within the district as a whole, the analysis also uncovers an interesting difference between the factors that shape choice decisions at different grade levels. Comparing the results for elementary schools to those for high schools reveals a number of important differences in the ways in which choice decisions are shaped at lower levels of the school system versus higher grade levels. For elementary schools, net transfers were shaped heavily by the racial characteristics of the student body (particularly the percentage of Hispanic students), while school performance was statistically insignificant. When the analysis was confined to high schools only, relative API scores remained significant, but the only race variable that remained significant was the percentage of black students. All of the coefficients were much higher at the high school level, which may be attributable in part to the fact that these schools generally are much larger than elementary schools and thus have a higher capacity for high volumes of transfers (both in and out). But it may also indicate stronger relationships between relative performance and choice decisions than are present in elementary schools. While the impact of race on net transfers disappeared at the high school level, school performance on test scores and relative suspensions had much stronger impacts at the high school level than they did in elementary schools.

One explanation for the differences in racial impacts on choice is that the Hispanic population in Tulsa has only recently increased to significant levels. The Hispanic population within Tulsa County public schools (including Tulsa city schools) has more than tripled over the last decade, from 4,014 (approximately 4 percent of the student body) in 1998 to 13,466 (more than 12 percent of the student body) in 2008 (Kuplicki 2008). In the Tulsa Public Schools, the Hispanic student population has increased by more than 40 percent over the last five years (Kuplicki 2008). This surge has been driven by young families who are only recently beginning to work their way through the public education system, and thus the impact of Hispanic students has been felt much more strongly at the elementary school level than it has at high school level, which has only recently seen significant increases in Hispanic student populations (Kuplicki 2008; Office of Accountability 2008).

Alternatively, school quality may matter more to parents at the high school level than it does in elementary schools, and thus performance indicators dominate decision making. At lower levels, where

differences in school quality are less stark to begin with, and where these disparities may be interpreted as less meaningful in terms of long-term impacts on student outcomes after graduation, race may play a more significant role because parents are not as concerned about school quality. At the high school level, where academic performance, particularly with regard to college preparation, has much more long-lasting impacts, and where students who have behavioral problems are more likely to receive significant punishment that would serve as a motivator to transfer elsewhere, race plays a smaller impact because school quality becomes extremely important to parents and students.

A final explanation for the differences in choice criteria at high schools versus elementary schools is that different decision makers enter the transfer process as students become older. Some scholars have found that at higher grade levels, student participation in the choice process increases (Gresham et al. 2000; Hess, Maranto, and Milliman 2001), and others have concluded that younger people are much less likely to be concerned with race than their parents (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). It may also be possible that race is less important at the high school level because the students are more active in the choice process, and they are simply less likely to harbor racial biases than their parents.

### Transfers In versus Transfers Out

The transfer policy in Tulsa requires a two-stage decision-making process (Buckley and Schneider 2007). Because students are assigned to the school closest to their residence by default, those wishing to switch schools must actively decide to transfer out of their home school. Once they decide to transfer out, they must then decide which of the alternative schools to transfer into. In addition to examining the factors that influence school choice decisions generally, the transfer data provided by the Tulsa Public Schools allow for the factors that influence choice decisions to transfer into and out of a school be analyzed separately. In much of the existing literature on school choice, transfer decisions are treated as a single cognitive process. As a result, very little attention has been given to differences in the criteria that parents and students use when evaluating whether to exit their current school versus those that are employed when evaluating potential alternatives. The data discussed here indicate that the decision to leave or exit is shaped by different factors than the decision about where to go once the parents/student has decided to transfer.

Table 4 presents the analysis for transfers in and transfers out. For transfers in, while school performance and racial demographic characteristics remained statistically significant and in the expected directions, the behavioral problems indicator (relative suspensions) was not statistically significant. This suggests that the decision about where to transfer *to* is motivated primarily by academic performance, along with the racial characteristics of the student body, and that concerns about behavioral problems or school safety do not play a prominent role.

With regard to transfers out, test scores and race variables remained significant, but in contrast to transfers in, campus discipline had a statistically significant and positive relationship (as the number of suspensions increases, so does the number of transfers out), indicating a potential difference in the ways in which parents/students

**Table 4** Performance versus Transfers In and Transfers Out

Independent Variable	Transfers In	Transfers Out
Relative test scores	0.019*** (0.006)	-0.014** (0.006)
Relative suspensions	-0.016 (0.014)	0.136*** (0.028)
Percent black	-0.608*** (0.119)	1.07*** (0.109)
Percent Hispanic	-1.11*** (0.171)	1.38*** (0.157)
Percent Native American	-1.41*** (0.349)	0.220 (0.297)
Enrollment	0.153*** (0.016)	0.137*** (0.015)
Constant	78.24*** (11.75)	-19.44** (7.97)
N	365	365

Dependent variables: Transfers in/transfers out.

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ .

evaluate their current school when deciding whether to transfer out versus the criteria used to evaluate potential alternatives. For transfers out, concerns about personal disciplinary problems may be the primary motivating factor for many students, in contrast to transfers in, for which the primary factors appear to be school academic performance and racial characteristics.

The fact that relative suspensions matter much more for transfers out than for transfers in may, in addition to indicating a difference in the ways in which parents/students evaluate schools when deciding to transfer *from* versus transfer *to*, provide further support for the claims made by administrators that many decisions to transfer in Tulsa are motivated by personal discipline problems.

## Conclusion

As the interviews with school administrators underscore, very little scholarship has taken a systematic look at administrative reactions to school choice. Aside from observing changes in parent/community outreach, very little school choice literature or research exists that explores changes in administrator behaviors as a response to choice. Choice proponents argue that market forces and competition result in better schools (and by extension, better student outcomes) because they encourage heightened innovation, entrepreneurship, and increased efficiency. But very little research indicates that choice results in alterations to administrator behaviors or management approaches that promote these improvements. Administrators in Tulsa, perhaps because they are denied the ability to accept or reject transfer applications on a case-by-case basis, largely viewed the presence of choice as a nonfactor in their management style.

Moreover, even less research exists that systematically tests whether these types of changes in administrative behaviors (assuming these changes occur as a result of choice policies) accomplish the desired goal (improved student outcomes). These findings, which indicate that administrators often do not react to choice in ways that are consistent with traditional economic theory, highlight a need for more attention to the assumed causal linkages between market forces, changes in administrative or managerial behavior, and improved student outcomes.

Additionally, this analysis revealed a second area of the school choice literature that is currently underdeveloped. Existing theories and research largely assume that school choice behavior is identical across grade levels. The findings presented in this analysis, however, indicate that there are significant differences in the ways in which students/parents exercise choice options at different grade levels. At lower grade levels, school performance appears to be much less important, and race (particularly with regard to the Hispanic student population) plays a much larger role, while transfer decisions at higher grade levels are driven almost exclusively by school performance.

It is unclear whether these differences are driven entirely by differences in the importance attached to school quality at different levels, or whether they are also driven by demographic differences between grade levels in Tulsa (the Hispanic population at the elementary school level is significantly larger than it is at the high school level), but both possibilities would be interesting areas for future research. It may be the case that the impact of race on school choice decisions varies from community to community, and that race has a larger impact when minority groups expand rapidly, causing school demographics to change significantly in a short period of time. Alternatively, parents may be less able to judge differences in school quality at lower levels, and thus may rely more on racial demographics as a heuristic to assess performance.

Finally, the analysis presented here revealed a third area of school choice research that needs more attention. Much of the existing literature operates on the assumption that decisions about transferring *to* a school are shaped by the same criteria as decisions about exiting or transferring *from* a school, and no significant research has attempted to examine these two aspects of the transfer process independent of each other. This analysis presented powerful evidence that there are significant differences in the circumstances that cause parents/students to exit or leave versus the criteria that parents/students use when evaluating an alternative school.

The data presented here indicate that when deciding whether to transfer out of a neighborhood school, parents/students primarily react to personal disciplinary problems and concerns about campus safety, rather than complaints about poor academic performance. Only when evaluating potential destination schools to transfer *into*, do parents/students rely on academic performance or quality, although at the elementary school level, they also rely heavily on racial demographics.

This suggests that schools where student exit is a major problem may have limited options in reversing such trends. In order to improve campus safety, school administrators and staff likely would need to take stronger disciplinary actions against students who create classroom distractions and an unsafe learning environment, but in doing so, they risk creating additional motivation for students to transfer out of the school, thus reducing overall enrollments significantly. Without heightened vigilance against disciplinary and safety issues, however, school administrators risk losing nontroublemakers, who react to substandard safety and security by transferring elsewhere. Further research is needed to disentangle these two groups of students (troublemakers and students concerned about safety), both of whom appear react to heightened problems with discipline

and safety in the same way (by transferring out), but for completely different reasons.

In closing, the school choice research literature, while extensive, still has several areas that need further exploration. This study highlights many of these gaps. In particular, our understanding of the relationships between school choice policies, the changes in administrative behavior that they are assumed to produce, and student outcomes is extremely limited. Further, while there has been extensive scholarship examining the ways that parents/students react to choice generally, very little research has analyzed differences in these decisions within varying racial, social, and cultural contexts and different grade levels. The analysis presented in this study takes an initial step in adding to our knowledge base within these areas, but there are clearly several important questions that future research will need to answer.

## Notes

1. Transfer data for the 2005 school year were estimated by averaging 2004 and 2006 totals.
2. The five magnet schools are Booker T. Washington High School, Carver Middle School, Thoreau Demonstration Academy, Mayo Demonstration Elementary School, and Eisenhower International Academy.
3. The six schools are Deborah Brown Community School, KIPP College Preparatory, Henry Zarrow International School, Newcomer International School, Dove Sciences Academy, and Tulsa School of Arts and Sciences.
4. The *xserial* package within Stata was used to perform the test and run corrective models. Drukker (2003) provides an analysis of this test.

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